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Colonial Folly, European Suicide

Adam Hochschild: Why World War I Was Such a Blood Bath

By ADAM HOCHSCHILD JULY 28, 2014

TURNER, Me. — ONE hundred years ago today, Austro-Hungarian artillery and gunboats on the Danube began shelling Serbia — the first shots of the great cataclysm that over the next four and a half years would remake our world for the worse, in every conceivable way. We think of the First World War as having its causes in Europe, where the greatest bloodshed and destruction would take place. But several of the illusions that propelled the major powers so swiftly into war had their roots in far corners of the world.

The biggest illusion, of course, was that victory would be quick and easy. “You will be home,” Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany told his troops, “before the leaves have fallen from the trees.” The German campaign plan called for knocking France out of the war in 42 days. The Allies were not quite so arrogant, but were confident of triumph in months, not years.

A second illusion of those who marched proudly into battle in 1914 was that they would be shooting at the enemy, but that he would not be shooting back, or at least not effectively. How else to explain that most soldiers on both sides had no metal helmets? And that millions of French infantrymen, as well as the Austro-Hungarian cavalry, wore combat uniforms of brilliant red and blue? As the war began, troops from both sides advanced over open ground en masse, as if they were not facing repeating rifles and machine guns: bayonet charges by the French, and ranks of young Germans walking, arms linked, toward astonished British soldiers. The British would make plenty of similar suicidal advances of their own in the years ahead.

Where were these illusions born? They came from the way generals cherry-

picked previous wars to learn from. A close look at the siege of Petersburg, Va., in the American Civil War, for instance, would have provided a lesson in trench warfare — and a sense of what it meant to be under fire from an early ancestor of the machine gun, the Gatling gun. A similar foretaste of both trench warfare and the power of the machine gun could be had by studying the siege of Port Arthur (now Dalian, China) in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5.

But the men who led Europe into the First World War found it more comforting to look elsewhere — at battles where victory was swift and the enemy had little firepower. In 1914 Europe had not had a major war in more than 40 years and, except for the Russians, almost all officers who had actually seen combat had done so in lopsided colonial wars in Africa and Asia.

Erich von Falkenhayn, for example, chief of the German General Staff for the first two years of the war, had been in the international force that suppressed the anti-Western Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900. Another veteran of that campaign — and of military service in Indochina and Algeria — was Robert Nivelle, later the French commander on the Western Front and the leader of a 1917 offensive that left 120,000 French soldiers dead or wounded and sparked a mutiny. Joseph Joffre, Nivelle's predecessor, had served in Indochina and Madagascar, and had led an expedition across the Sahara to conquer Timbuktu. Most of the British generals had served in the colonies; when war broke out, Britain had more troops on active duty in India alone than in the British Isles.

Colonial wars seldom lasted long because the German, French and British Armies had modern rifles, machine guns and small mobile artillery pieces, as well as steamboats and railroads that could move men and weapons as needed. The Africans and Asians usually had none of these things.

In 1898, for example, a whole panoply of British officers (including Winston Churchill) who would later fight in Europe were on hand for a battle at Omdurman, in Sudan. The 50,000 Sudanese they faced were armed only with spears, swords and antiquated rifles. In a few hours, the six Maxim machine guns of the far smaller Anglo-Egyptian force fired half a million bullets, leaving nearly 11,000 Sudanese dead and some 16,000 wounded, many fatally. The battle determined the outcome of a war in less than a day.

The miraculous new gun “is a weapon,” wrote the Army and Navy Journal, “which is specially adapted to terrify a barbarous or semi-civilised foe.” The

Europeans were so enraptured by the power the machine gun gave them over colonial rebels that they never bothered to plan seriously for facing the weapon themselves.

Yet another illusion on both sides in 1914 was that a key force would be the cavalry. After all, hadn't cavalry service been a path to military glory for more than 2,000 years? At the Cavalry Club on London's Piccadilly Circus and its counterparts in Paris, Berlin, St. Petersburg and Vienna, officers eagerly anticipated more of the same. The initial German invasions of France and Belgium, for example, included eight cavalry divisions with more than 40,000 horses — the largest such body ever sent into battle in Western Europe. Tens of thousands of the unfortunate animals were laboriously shipped to the front over great distances: to the Middle East from New Zealand, to Belgium from Canada, to France from India.

Faith in the cavalry also sprang from colonial wars. British horsemen made a charge at Omdurman and did so far more spectacularly a year and a half later in another colonial conflict, the Boer War. Masked by an immense cloud of dust kicked up by thousands of galloping horses, the British successfully charged, almost unscathed, through Boer forces besieging the town of Kimberley, in present-day South Africa. "An epoch in the history of cavalry," declared the London Times history of that war. "A staggering success," read a German General Staff report on the battle.

The commander and the chief of staff of the cavalry involved — then close friends, later bitter rivals — were John French and Douglas Haig. A decade and a half later, the two would be successive British commanders on the Western Front. Although Haig obviously learned some lessons about industrialized warfare from the carnage in France and Belgium, he was, like so many generals, loath to let go of his colonial-era illusions. To the very end, he kept three British cavalry divisions ready, and even eight years after the war was still lobbying to maintain the cavalry, writing that "aeroplanes and tanks" were "only accessories to the man and the horse."

None of the many military observers in the Boer War seemed to notice that one simple defensive measure could have stopped the great charge at Kimberley dead: barbed wire. On the Western Front in 1914, that, along with the machine gun, would spell doom for the cavalry and for the other illusions as well.

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